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Bikes-to-go are looking pretty good

Almost all of the 40 public bicycle hire schemes in this first-time comparison of schemes in cities throughout Europe offer their bikes at permanent rental stations in their area. But that's where the similarities end. With such a diverse range of offers, differences in quality have to be expected. This becomes obvious as soon as we look at the number of stations where bikes can be picked up. This ranges from just a single station in the case of BUGA in Aveiro, Portugal, to 1,751 in the case of Vélib' in Paris. France's capital also holds the record for the number of bicycles: 23,900. Compared to second-place Barclay's Cycle Hire in London with its 558 stations and 9,200 bicycles, we can see just how impressive this record is.

And the winner is: France

But still, Paris, which is certainly setting an example for the rest of the world, only received a "Good" rating and came second in this European comparison. The capital city was nipped at the post by fellow countryman vélo'v in Lyon, the only scheme to receive a "Very good" rating. 343 stations with 4,000 bicycles, available to anyone all year round, linked to local public transport, easy and free registration, fully automated bicycle pick-up and return at any station, information provided in several languages and accessible in many different ways - that's pretty close to the perfect bike-to-go system.

"Vélo'v" in Lyon came top:



A tie for last place

Two Dutch OV-fiets systems in Amsterdam and The Hague tied for last place. They were closely followed by OV-fiets in Utrecht which came in third-last. These three Dutch bicycle systems were the only ones to receive "Very Poor" ratings throughout. But while Utrecht at least had close to 700 bicycles on offer, the other two last-place services also failed to do well in this category. Densely populated Amsterdam has 562 bicycles on offer at 14 stations while The Hague has only 258 bicycles for hire at four stations.

That aside, the remaining categories all proved to be pretty similar. In other words: different operating hours depending on the station, registration is not free and only possible on the Internet, bikes cannot be picked up immediately or returned to any station, payment is only possible by direct debit, information provided in the language of the country only, and what's really surprising in the land of cyclists, bicycles have neither suspension nor gears. That's what users can expect, but it's certainly not what they want. As our comparison showed, the national OV-fiets bicycle hire system is not really suitable for tourists who spontaneously decide to use a bike. This system is provided by the national rail company and its rental stations are primarily located at train stations so the service is especially designed for domestic customers, such as commuters and business travellers.

Ov-fiets systems in the Netherlands, not the most accessible:



More than half of the schemes are good

There's a world of difference between first place and the only "Very good" rating, and the three "Very poor" ratings at the bottom of the table. In a nutshell, that's 23 "Good" ratings, eleven "Acceptable" and two "Poor". The majority of hire systems in the comparison are suitable for tourists as well as locals. The service provided by 60 percent of operators covers the entire city and more than a third of services are limited to the city centre. Vélib' in Paris and velopass in Lausanne actually go beyond the city borders. In most cases, customer cards are used for access. Around a third of systems use a station terminal or code for access. A credit card is necessary to unlock the bikes at around a quarter of the systems.

The obvious shortcomings

Let's move on now to the most frequent shortcomings which made renting a bike either inconvenient or uncomfortable.

With the exception of Copenhagen and Aarhus, all of the schemes compared had a restriction on age (in some cases cyclists even have to be at least 18 years of age). 35 of the 40 systems were found to have no suspension in their bikes. 26 systems had too few stations so that it took time to find a station. The bicycles from 26 rental systems were covered with advertising and this can affect handling. Having to pay for a service hotline is also annoying, as is the case for 24 of the systems compared. The 18 websites that are provided only in the national language certainly need to be improved.

Special aspects that deserve mention

Let's now take a look at those schemes in the 18 countries where certain aspects deserve special mention. First stop is Germany with seven systems in the comparison: in Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne, Leipzig, Munich, Nuremberg and Stuttgart. All seven received "Good" ratings. Call a Bike in Stuttgart is the only system in the comparison that even had 60 electric bikes, so-called Pedelects, on offer. Call a Bike in Cologne and Munich is also unique: the bikes are not located at stations but can be found anywhere at road crossings, so that they are fully flexible. Homeport Praha in Prague, a trial model with 20 bicycles at six stations, was included in the comparison - and managed to receive a "Good" rating. This is a new system that is relatively successfully catching up on the more established systems. Spain had four systems in the comparison: in Valencia, Seville, Saragossa and Barcelona. Two "Good" and two "Acceptable" ratings meant a positive result for Spain. Bicing in Barcelona, the last place among the Spanish systems, is also an internationally recognised system that failed to come out tops in the comparison, especially since it is exclusively reserved for people living in the city.

Hop on a bike for free in three cities

Aarhus bycykel and Bycyklen i København in Denmark were rated "Acceptable". What's unusual here is that both systems are completely free of charge. All you need to get going is a coin (20 Danish crowns) which you then remove when you return the bike, just like with a shopping trolley. The only other free system is at BUGA in Aveiro, Portugal, although this system was rated "Poor" because there is only a single point of sale, as well as one lonely rental station, and on top of that staff assistance is required to rent a bike. The ratings in Italy differed considerably: a "Good" rating for BikeMi in Milan and [TO]Bike in Turin and an "Acceptable" rating for Punto Bici Bike Sharing in Parma. BARI in Bari, on the other hand, only received a "Poor" rating. This was primarily due to the few stations and bikes, limited availability time and the 18-year age requirement, as well as very poor information. That's it for the unusual features found in the countries.

Some bikes won't cost you a thing:



Aarhus (Denmark)



Aveiro (Portugal)

Prices are all over the place

All that's left now are prices. These differed so much that it was impossible to fit them into any frame of reference and for this reason we merely recorded them, but did not rate them. The many different offers made it almost impossible to compare the different systems with one another. OV-Fiets in the Netherlands, Citybike Wien and nextbike St. Pölten in Austria as well as WRM nextbike Breslau in Poland, for instance, do not offer any kind of membership. Users simply pay for each trip. The systems in the other cities in the comparison offer at least one-day, three-day, seven-day, monthly or annual membership. The prices for a three-day card range from one euro at vélo'v in Lyon and vélhop in Strasbourg to the equivalent of 18.61 euro at Sweden's Stockholm City Bikes, a year's membership at Bicikelj in Slovenia's capital city of Ljubljana costs three euro while Barclays Cycle Hire in London charges 55.07 euro. That's it for membership.

Long-time usage is not what operators want

What's generally true is that the prices charged for short-time usage are lower than those charged when bikes are used over a longer period of time. The incentive to use bikes for short journeys is often boosted by free minutes, i.e. the first 30 or even 60 minutes for free. On the other hand, longer usage is often prevented by a maximum usage period of three (Smartbike in Oslo, Stockholm City Bikes) or four hours (Velo-Antwerpen in Antwerp). Longer usage may also be sanctioned by excessively expensive hourly rates. In terms of price, hiring a bike in Turin for 24 hours would cost a whopping 138 euro. The OV-fiets services in Amsterdam, The Hague and Utrecht are the exception to this. These systems charge users ten euro for first-time registration, after that, the bikes can be used for up to 24 hours for just three euro. It's difficult for users to sieve through the jungle of rates and charges - and many of the operators' websites also fail to make matters any clearer.

Pioneering work on the part of EuroTest

ADAC and its partner clubs have once again assumed a pioneering role with this, the first comparison of public bicycle schemes in European cities as part of the EuroTest consumer protection programme. This is a growing market that has a long way to go before becoming soundly established. Operating models and standards have yet to be put to the test, especially with a view to specific aspects of transport policy in the different cities and countries. That's another reason why this objective comparison is so important from a consumer perspective and should entice operators to adapt and optimise their systems.

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City	System	weighting	Accessability				Overall Rating	City	System	weighting	Accessability				Overall Rating
			35%	26%	25%	14%					35%	26%	25%	14%	
(F) Lyon	vélo'v		++	++	++	o	++	(IRL) Dublin	dublinbikes		o	+	++	o	+
(F) Paris	Vélib'		++	+	++	+	+	(A) Vienna	Citybike Wien		o	+	+	o	+
(B) Brussels	Villo!		+	++	++	+	+	(CH) Biel	velospot		+	-	+	++	+
(D) Berlin	Call a Bike		+	+	++	++	+	(CH) Lausanne	velopass		+	+	o	o	+
(D) Stuttgart	Call a Bike		+	+	++	++	+	(CH) Lugano	velopass		o	+	o	o	o
(L) Luxembourg	vel'oh!		+	++	++	o	+	(DK) Aarhus	Aarhus bycykel		+	+	+	--	o
(E) Valencia	Valenbisi		+	+	+	+	+	(I) Parma	Punto Bici Bike Sharing		o	+	+	o	o
(D) Hamburg	StadtRAD Hamburg		o	+	++	++	+	(GB) London	Barclays Cycle Hire		o	o	+	o	o
(I) Milan	BikeMi		o	++	++	o	+	(PL) Wroclaw	WRM nextbike		o	-	++	+	o
(I) Turin	[TO]BIKE		+	++	+	+	+	(DK) Copenhagen	Bycyklen i København		+	-	++	--	o
(E) Seville	SEVici		+	+	+	o	+	(N) Oslo	Smartbike		-	+	+	o	o
(F) Marseille	le vélo		+	+	++	o	+	(F) Strasbourg	Vélhop		o	-	+	o	o
(D) Munich	Call a Bike		o	+	+	++	+	(E) Saragossa	Bizi		--	+	+	o	o
(D) Cologne	Call a Bike		o	+	+	++	+	(S) Stockholm	Stockholm City Bikes		--	++	+	o	o
(D) Nuremberg	Norisbike		+	+	+	+	+	(E) Barcelona	Bicing		--	++	o	o	o
(B) Antwerp	Velo-Antwerpen		o	++	+	o	+	(I) Bari	BARlinBici		-	-	o	o	-
(D) Leipzig	nextbike		o	+	+	o	+	(P) Aveiro	BUGA		o	-	--	o	-
(SLO) Ljubljana	Bicikelj		o	++	+	o	+	(NL) Utrecht	OV-fiets		--	-	--	o	--
(CZ) Prague	HOMEPORT Praha		o	+	+	+	+	(NL) Amsterdam	OV-fiets		--	-	--	o	--
(A) St. Pölten	nextbike		o	++	+	o	+	(NL) The Hague	OV-fiets		--	-	--	o	--

Rating ++ very good + good o acceptable - poor -- very poor